

Cutting Representation.
Resistances of the present image
Luis Puelles

The actor's tears flow from his brain.
Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*

Coming to think that María Dávila is armed with a scalpel and assuming that her images – as events in still tension – are defined by actions of excision, I amuse myself hunting for a clue – which allows me to look at these mute figures – in the appalling ‘philosophical dictionary of surgery’ written by Cristóbal Pera, *El cuerpo herido* (The wounded body). While prowling around the dictionary entries, I let myself be seduced by the illusion – because from start to end we will be overwhelmed by the rhetoric of illusion – that these blurred and illegible paintings arise as effects without substance from the sophisticated operation of cuts and extractions made by the artist on the canvas where the body as image leaves the recumbent representation.

What escapes representation on this dissecting table, where painting or the painter herself invokes the longing for a narration in which we could take refuge and the relentless stillness of the figures is the image and the power of its presence, more precisely, the image as opacity and intransitivity, the image which comes ‘after’ writing, but also ‘behind’ it. The painter applies herself to prioritise images, to impose them over all other things, to release them from legibility and the possibility of any protective sense. The painting or the painter puts the images first and in front of us, presenting them as inevitable apparitions.

By dint of separations and interruptions, *Post-Scriptum*'s paintings are rigorous operations addressed against everything interfering with the unambiguous will of showing these figures, which want to be sovereign. Only thus, resisting the logic of representation, can these images be seen as they wish to be seen: as presence without clarity revealing and concluding them, without distance to bring them back to representation. Most importantly, these images are capable of creating effects. In my view, this is the main goal of María Dávila's machine-paintings. The artist creates the conditions for imposing these images and prevents rationality from reaching them. Unless we manage not to see them, the almost hypnotic effect of immediacy is the loss of the distance by which the recipients of these works, when facing these images from a contemplative perspective, think they understand them. In a manner clearly contrary to that of the cinematographic image, these paintings seek to relegate us to be their objects. Therefore – or to this end – they veil themselves with enigma, becoming subjects willing to escape.

When present, the image confronts and fascinates us until we manage to escape – and to move away – and reach the representation needed to give sense to it. The embellishing sterilisation of artistic operations is related to the distance transforming them into a representation coated with formal and plastic qualities which deserve our admiration. María Dávila's work is not along these lines. Moreover, it is not so despite appearances, even if her images want to please the eye and are terribly seductive. We will soon come back to this point, but now let us speak of Pera's dictionary.

Disturbed by the positioning of the hands in these figures that show and hide themselves – silent, absorbed, seen from behind – and remembering that this paradoxical simultaneity defines Adorno's notion of ‘enigma’, I stop myself at Pera's dictionary entry for ‘surgery’, which reads as follows: ‘Etymologically, the word “surgery” comes from the Greek *kheirourgia*, which is composed

of the terms *kheir* (hand) and *érgon* (work), so in principle its semantic field reaches everything related to manual work, technique (*techné*) and manual skill.' Surprisingly enough, these words match the surgeon's and the painter's practices. The two of them stand before a body which will be submitted to the sharp point of a manual instrument used to 'define' or 'dissect', to draw lines and perimeters, to evacuate the blood or to bring images to presence. They tear, extract and isolate the different parts. They focus their gaze on the still matter, evading the possibility of life in it. The painter-surgeon immobilises representation in order to show its functioning. With different nuances, this same vocation was already present in Picabia, Léger, Duchamp and Max Ernst's unreal machines as well as in Max Ernst's collages. Here is one of the fates of modern representation: to be despoiled by the action of painting itself. This can be seen both in the great Picabia and Paul Klee's defamiliarisation of the sign and in the permanent profanation carried out by Picasso. Duchamp transformed the broken-down representation – which was already visible, objectified and transportable – in the main motif of his games, which were considered artworks. He played chess with representation and stopped the game when he felt it; he filled his pipe... and did not resume the game. *Post Scriptum*'s paintings are Duchampian.

Dávila sharpens her intelligence by making two strategic incisions in the continuity of representation. The first is rather a 'clipping' (the obtaining of the *tableau*); it spatialises the image by interrupting or suspending the narration flow. The second extracts the appearance from the essence; thus, the breach between immanence and transcendence is made clear, invalidating the metaphysical necessity for sense, which implies that the image – or the sensitive – is the concrete and restrained appearance of some logical, primitive and abstract sense. The painter focusses her gaze and scalpel in this double action: to fix the image and to bring it to surface without any possible perspective. Nothing will remain after the image or behind it or at the back of it and there is nothing before it. Thus comes the image to presence, thus it is rescued from the proceedings that cannot look at it if they understand it. Radically speaking, one could say that the action of looking is incompatible with understanding or reading. The action of looking lies in 'extracting' the image from the hole of representation. The painter-surgeon removes the presence of the image and creates the resistances of its showing.

The first excision consists of extracting or removing – suspending the image in front of the eyes without any support – the figures from the fables, the *tableau* from the narration, the visible from the temporality of legibility and the image from the materialisation of meaning. Thus is achieved the interruption of the complex inference of the signs where lies understanding. To this effect, the painter uses paralysing resources such as the absence of perspective, the expansion of the foreground, the lack of any habitable composition and the deficiency of narration. Mutism is everywhere and the touch cannot catch anything. María Dávila and her evasive paintings – which cannot be 'grasped' by logos – are in the wake of Manet.

These images fail to be occupied and expelled by meaning. In order to be looked at – they live off that – images must be inhabitable and inhospitable, convex and not concave. The instantaneity of the plastic image was defined in ontological terms by Lessing in his *Laocoon* (1766). In this work, painting – and here begins the persistent path towards its sovereignty – is completely isolated and strains into a space opened by the image itself; it occupies it – it becomes surface in order to occupy this space – between the previous and the subsequent, in a pregnant moment which refers to what happened and to what will happen. Dávila's operations use the implications of this suggestive suspension. Her ironic interest for narration in cinema and theatre stems from here.

Nevertheless, together with the weakness of the precepts of composition, the cancellation of perspective and the use of the foreground – which was studied by Benjamin in his 1936 writing on

the aura – the cuts made by the artist tear the fundamental notion of contemplation. Let us analyse this point in detail. The notion of contemplation has managed to escape the desecrating revision made by genealogist and deconstructive post-Nietzschean hermeneutics, hence the great intellectual interest of irony in these machine-paintings. It suffices to show the cut made to the object of vision in order to highlight representation. The word ‘contemplation’ comes from the Latin verb *contemplare*, a derivative from *templum*, which initially defined the airspace delimited by the augur’s cane in order to observe the omens. In his work *El ojo místico* (The mystic eye), Victor Stoichita mentions the *templum*: ‘One of the primitive senses of the word *templum* is the sky. Subsequently, the word referred to a rectangle drew in the sky, a consecrated space created to be “contemplated.”’ The augur cuts the sky and consecrates it with his cane. María Dávila is the painter-augur. At least she makes us think so. Stopping the image by removing it from the continuity of time is the first condition to fix it as an object for contemplation and the contemplative attitude has a feature of consecration or transcendence that cannot be evaded, since even when we refer to aesthetic contemplation in modern terms, we make the assumption that we can reach a ‘high’ and ‘extraordinary’ meaning, which more or less redeems us from crude reality. Dávila knows all this and makes it work in her favour. The artist does her paintings as if naively offering them for contemplation. However, just when the spectator is ready to receive the sacred – which cannot be touched – the vertigo arrives because there is only surface. It is understood that the supremacy of plasticity does not easily give in to transcendent temptations. Even if the paintings in *Post-Scriptum* cut representation, they do not offer anything ‘beyond’ their figures. There are paintings but not sky. We look at them without being able to escape them.

This ironic use of contemplation brings us closer to the second of those actions which, as mentioned before, is aimed at isolating the impenetrable surface – because no modern image or painting can be inhabited by sense, because if it is necessary to ‘enter,’ then it is representation, not image – cutting it ‘from behind’ or ‘from the inside’ and the genealogy of this use takes us to Denis Diderot. In his delightful *Paradox of Acting*, written around 1773, Diderot made an excision to the old Platonic tradition according to which the face was the mirror of the soul and the visible, the transitive expression of interiority that can be expressed without feigning. Diderot emancipated appearance, breaking its subordination to the inside and the heart. Thus, actors can play their role separating themselves from the emotions they rehearse in front of the mirror. Actors simulate and dissimulate skilfully without externalising their feelings. Representation is fiction, María Dávila is well aware of this. This Diderotian separation between the grammar – and the rhetoric – of body gestures and the intimate states of subjectivity, which took place after those decades in which the rococo pretence of affections became natural, warns us about one of the most powerful achievements of these paintings: against all appearances, in these paintings nobody feels anything; there are only gestures on the surface; actors who are experts in ‘copying’ without feeling; suitability and rhetoric without subjectivity. Dávila copies (from) the copy showing us that nothing ‘true’ hides behind it. Below, we will return to this *mise en abîme* which avoids immediacy in representation.

If, like naïve spectators, we come to believe that these images express, convey or act to show some kind of depth or that the dark reason why they are appearances is that they are essentially emotional and dramatic and not sophisticatedly ironic and dissecting, or if, being gullible, we choose to suppose that these images are prey to tragic events and are attractive simulations of pathos, we cannot affirm – before these paintings which have a skilful intelligence for pretending – that nothing in them is different from exteriority without behind and inside – and without any

possible previous readings; these surfaces are completely saturated with mere visibility, games of immanence aimed at dissolving the logic of representation.

The fantastic images obtained by the painter-surgeon after making those cuts and clippings keep us out of the meaning, expelled from a narration in which we could take refuge. This frontal condition – that of those who are prey to shadows in Plato's cave – provides the images with something essential: our fascinated gaze. Decided not to be a shared symbol – as we share creeds and participate in ceremonies – or a designative and communicative sign, the modern image, which is detached from the ontological density of inner meanings and supports, must focus obsessively, with all its strength, on fixing us to its evasive exteriority. It can be said that the images of sovereign painting cannot allow themselves to stop being looked at. That is the reason why at least since Manet everything is plasticity and, therefore, an effect of illusion aimed at maintaining spectators within the tension of the gaze. To that effect, the artist must block the process of understanding, avoiding the distance which allows us to escape from the immanence of the figures in order to seek a protective transition towards meaning. Melodrama, pathos of gestures and shivers of suspense are the tools of the arts of representation placed before us by these paintings as lures of meaning.

Édouard Manet, the great inventor of paralysing surfaces, transformed mutism into the victory of the image against the transivities of representation. The paintings in *Post Scriptum* belong to this lineage of silence, misunderstandings and absent gazes; they are devoted to hindering acknowledgment without cancelling it, maybe only postponing it or deferring it. To do so, modern painting – reaching itself and acquiring the power characteristic of these works – has had to take a path which has led it from the episteme of the sign to the immanence of the figure. These paintings by Dávila, like those by Manet or Magritte – whose paintings are closer than initially appears to these images as well as to those of Tuymans and Borremans – become exhausted when they try to be seen. That is: they do not become exhausted at all.

The painter persists in the above-mentioned double excision, separating interiority from exteriority and instant from duration, focussing on an unavoidable goal: providing the image with its greatest power of presence, allowing it to be and, above all, releasing it from the traps used by logocentrism to transform into signs everything it touches. With this determination, *Post-Scriptum* gathers the telltale evidence around the *mise en évidence* of the logic of representation, which only acts when staying transparent, that is, when going unnoticed. María Dávila devotes her paintings to looking at representation through them, until she manages to notice that everything in them is fiction – and certainly, this does not only mean that fiction is representation. Henceforth, it will suffice to submit it to the 'objectualisation' implied in the action of imitating, as she does lucidly, painting after painting. These paintings see representation and copy it.

In these canvases we see the decomposition of representation, the breakdowns made visible when representation is taken as a 'model' for painting. Observing and copying frames is a possible way of revealing its factitious nature. The gears, the tricks and the legends allow us to read the characters' 'thoughts' and their falseness. Everything becomes visible when the immediate habitability of representation becomes blocked. María Dávila looks, differentiates, chooses, cuts, stops, copies and so on until she sees it. Of course, she does not want to enter; otherwise these images would be only frames to compose a story. That is the reason why these images fascinate us: we are motionless and outside.

This is not about insisting on the fact that fiction is a more or less plausible construction. This is about observing, until vertigo, that representation is fiction that must be accomplished in perfection, without cracks showing its intermediate and interposed nature, without fissures, so nothing can get out of there, perfectly invisible.

Unexpectedly, in Book 10 of *The Republic* by Plato (598b), Socrates' definition of the image can inspire us with regard to how these paintings, which come 'at the end of the writing,' are inevitably alien to the cognitional ways which question their identity as events, accounts or characters. The quote goes as follows:

To what is painting directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or of appearance as it appears? Is it an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth?" "Of a phantasm" he said. "Then the mimetic art is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that is a phantom [an image].

What is special about painting is the imitation of appearance, the imitation of the sensitive and its ways of appearing, its statute for producing images, which 'touches or lays hold of only a small part of the things. There are only images where there are images, barely touching the things, without penetrating them or possessing them, although empowered to take the place of them and prevail over them. Without going in depth into the identity of things – precisely for this reason – and without understanding the essential meaning of what they manage to usurp, images are this light contact – something like the vaporous nature of the image-phantom – required to create the illusion of simulating the appearance of the thing without the thing. The minimum contact will provide the painting with the enormous power of showing what it barely knows. This is its greatest power, as well as its greatest modern complexity: Chardin, Goya the portrait painter, Seurat, Spilliaert, Morandi, Richter, Tuymans, Borremans and also María Dávila work on it. In this art the eye works on providing a static appearance to what it should not have to know.

Written more than half a century ago, the annex pages of *The Logic of Sense* by Gilles Deleuze ponder about the *inversion of Platonism* in a Nietzschean way, returning us to a certain division – once again we are in front of a cut, but this time it is the foundational one – which is critical to the Western future of images. This division was established in 'The Sophist' (235d) between the images produced by the figurative technique (*tékhnē eikastikē*), which were copies with the sole mission of reproducing their models with obedient and unequivocal accuracy – beyond the technical (and artistic) inadequacies of this clearly 'realistic' task – and those other images, the image-simulations that 'only appear to be like them, without really being like them' (236b), between the images which intend to reach their model and those other appearances which endeavour to prevail, imposing themselves as deceptive presences. While the latter seem to resemble the model, they are not indicative of anything real. They pretend to appear what is not. Their only dimension is to be appearances or phantoms. They appear but they are not like (236 d).

However, from the very moment when this simple distinction is made, the two terms become confusing, blurred and vague. The reason for this frustration of the above-mentioned division – which attempted to protect the image-copy from the false pretender that is the image-phantom – lies in the fact that the only identity of the simulacrum is its power, which can produce misunderstandings and illusions. Its greatest strength is not being merely a poor copy, since this would reveal its inability to make an accurate duplicate, but rather its power for invalidating the link between the model and the copy, a link faithful to reality. The image-simulation 'is not merely a false copy, but it questions the very same notions of copy and model.'

In my view, the resource used by María Dávila consisting of taking 'models' or 'motifs' from other fields of representation which could almost be taken as 'natural' must be assessed this way. Deleuze's reading of the Platonic distinction between the copy which is at the service of reality and the copy which only uses reality to take the place of it – the latter being the simulacrum –

seems to me specially appropriate in order to understand the procedure by which her paintings abolish the metaphysical principle according to which there is an ultimate, definitive and unquestionable reality which a good painter of authorised copies should attempt to reach. As with simulacrum, the paintings in *Post Scriptum* discredit reality. They are the remnants of the remnants. Resulting from human imagination, these artifices are banned from the old equation which kept us happy in the confusion between substance and reality, between what has not been created by mankind – nature or the celestial – and true sense.

When faced with the threatening sabotage of the 'lawful' relation of subordination between the copy and the original model – which can be verified – carried out by simulacra, which can pretend to resemble the non-existent, Deleuze reveals Plato's main intention: 'It is all about guaranteeing the victory of copies over simulacra, about inhibiting, restraining [*refouler*] simulacra, keeping them chained to the depths and preventing them from surfacing and suggesting their presence everywhere.'

The inversion of Platonism should be the emergence of phantoms and their conquest of the impenetrable surface. This is precisely what is present in María Dávila's images, which are devoted to the advent of simulacra, releasing them from the ideas and the need for truth and, with them, from the link based on the ontological and cognitive validity between the original and the copy, between the model and its duplicate.

Now let us take a final step. Since Manet's contributions dating from the 1860, the artistic image has gained autonomy by taking two strategic directions which have to be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the great embellishing, plasticist, formalist and absorbed tradition of spectacle, which one way or another leads us to different abstract poetics. In contrast, there is a different lineage where I see Dávila's painting, the main goal of which is to defamiliarise spectators from identification – more than becoming absorbed in its own vanity – provoking the ambiguity of the sign and imposing a confusing and partially illegible figurality. The sovereignty of this second direction is totally modern and is not correlated to the negation of all referentiality – *Post Scriptum* being 'absolutely' referential – but rather to the need to keep painting inaccessible in terms of legibility and the mere mimetic copy of the perceptible reality.

In his work on Francis Bacon, Deleuze refers to Lyotard's¹ hermeneutical category of 'the figural' when describing the characteristics of the Irish artist's painting, underlining this two-way resistance to figuration:

Painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate. It thus has two possible ways of escaping the figurative: towards pure form, through abstraction; or towards the purely figural, through extraction or isolation. If the painter keeps to the Figure, if he or she opts for the second path, it will be to oppose the 'figural' to the figurative.

¹ I should make clear that I use the category of 'the figural' in this context following Jean-François Lyotard's propositions put forward in his work *Discours, Figure*: 'As for the space of figure, "figural" qualifies it better than "figurative." Indeed the latter term, in the vocabulary of painting and contemporary criticism, opposes the space of the figure to "non-figurative" or "abstract." The relevant feature of this opposition resides in the analogy of the representative and the represented, and in the spectator's ability to recognize the latter in the former... Figurativity is thus a property that applies to the plastic object's relation to what it *represents*; it becomes irrelevant if the picture no longer fulfills a representational function, that is, if it is the object itself.' According to Lyotard, the figural is defined against the textual.

The images in *Post Scriptum* throw their figures against the figurative. Through eventualities and misunderstandings, they undermine the habitual order used to identify the real, 'unrealising' it. For that purpose, the distorting images – those appearances which pass themselves off as valid copies of the sameness – deploy an essential power consisting of destabilising the subject in relation to the protective distance achieved through understanding – and, at another level, through aesthetic attitudes – transforming the world into its representation.

We come to the end of these lines and I realise about which seems to me to be the main effect produced by this painting: fascination. As Odilon Redon wrote in his journal: 'The sense of mystery consists of continuous ambiguity, of the double and triple aspects, hints of aspects (images within images), forms that are about to come into being or will take their being from the onlooker's state of mind.' Thus the fascinating image brings us closer to it while excluding us. In relation to this requirement, in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Roland Barthes offers a fantastic definition of the image (or, preferably, of the survival of the image as presence): 'Here then, at last, is the definition of the image, of any image: that from which I am excluded.'

The anti-Platonic conquest of the image is the ability to cause what is there to disappear: 'The image requires the neutrality and the effacement of the world, it wants everything to return to the indifferent depth where nothing is affirmed, it inclines toward the intimacy of what still continues to exist in the void; its truth lies there,' wrote Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*. This is the truth of these paintings: to continue to exist in the void, uncaptured.